

Alternative Schools Advisory Committee

Year End Report 2011

Richard Deadman, Chair

Executive Summary

At the end of the 2010 school year, the Alternative Program found itself in a unusual combination of enthusiasm and confusion. On the one hand, the board of trustees had re-asserted their support for the program but on the other hand trustees had voted to close 1/6th of the alternative schools in the board during a process that was not supposed to be about schools but rather about the program.

Similarly, senior board staff met with ASAC and committed to re-building the trust on both sides required to work effectively together, while at the same time telling the program that they could no longer implement parental-choice anecdotal report cards.

ASAC entered the 2010-2011 school year with a full plate of issues to deal with:

- A long-needed review of our tenets and how they are put into practice
- A postmortem into why Manor Park was perceived as a failure by the board
- An investigation into what form of parental-choice anecdotal report cards are permitted by the Ministry of Education
- Work with the board on extending busing to all areas inside the greenbelt.
- As well, investigate a demand survey outside of the greenbelt after a communication plan has been enacted.
- Review, Input and Consultation on the Board's Strategic Plan (aka Towards a 21st Century Learner)
- Co-ordination, assistance and funding on an Alternative Sports Day held at Summit with the other Alternative schools to share best practices and build the community.
- Provide input and advice to OCASC on Parental Involvement, as well as an offer to become involved in the provincially mandated Parental Involvement Committee

ASAC has worked hard on these issues. The following report outlines our work and the recommendations to the board that ASAC makes in its advisory capacity:

1. The board must re-align its strategic plan to support grass-roots innovation, choice and “French for All”.
2. If the board wants an Alternative Program that is different, it must be prepared to support that program in being different. “Fair” and “Same” are different words with different meanings.
3. The board needs to clarify its marketing strategy, not only in regards to how it makes some alternative practices available to other schools (see trustee motions B, C, D and F of the Alternative Elementary Program Review, February 2010), but also in making the existence of the program better known across the board. This is essential as the board plans to do a demand survey of parents outside the greenbelt.

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Alternative Tenet Review

The Alternative Program was founded in 1982 with the creation of Lady Evelyn Alternative, a K-3 program. Over the years the program has undergone various internal and board reviews, such as “A New Vision: 1998 Report” and the 2008 “Towards a Revitalization of the Alternative Program”. Implementing some of the recommendations of the 2008 report, however, was impeded by the awareness that the board was intending to do a review of the program itself. Staff did not want to commit to changes to the program until its future had been clearly determined.

At the end of the Elementary Alternative Program Review in the winter of 2009, trustees agreed to preserve and strengthen the Alternative Program. The review, however, did not address two of its five mandates:

(ii) to determine the extent to which a strengthened, or redefined, alternative program would be expected to differ from that expected to result from planned improvements to regular programs;

...

(iv) in the event of a decision to continue with alternative programming in elementary schools, that a process to focus on program quality and continuously bringing pedagogical or best practice benefit to the whole District be developed; and

Trustees did pass sub-motions G, H and I that directed staff to work with ASAC on issues of best practices, school effectiveness framework adherence, and principal profiles. In particular, sub-motions G and H state:

G. THAT staff work with the Alternative Schools Advisory Committee to identify what opportunities there are for alternative schools to showcase "current best alternative practices" for the other elementary schools in the board.

H. THAT the Alternative Schools Advisory Committee be asked to contribute to an investigation through a detailed review of the School Effectiveness Framework of, the scope of the alternative practices that could be recommended for implementation/trial/piloting in any elementary school in the district and for improving the quality of alternative practices in designated alternative schools.

In the fall of 2010 ASAC contacted Superintendent Adams and requested guidance on how these motions of the board were going to be dealt with. At this point Superintendent Adams suggested that senior staff, schools and ASAC work together to look at the Alternative tenets, how they fit into the school effectiveness framework and what changes may be appropriate to the tenets.

Superintendent Yorke-Slader and superintendent Wiley then became the contact point between ASAC and senior board staff.

To date, there have been two meetings held between school council chairs, ASAC, principals, teachers, senior staff and trustee representatives, one on December 1st with a smaller group, and a larger meeting on February 8th. In support of these meetings, and in part to address the original review mandate of “*to determine the extent to which a strengthened, or redefined, alternative program would be expected to differ*”, ASAC set up an “Alternative Tenets Subcommittee” to work with schools and school councils to review their tenets and make recommendations for updates and changes to reflect the updated goals, expectations and understandings. These school reviews were undertaken based on two guiding principles:

1. The basic tenets are valuable and must be used as a starting point.
2. While implementations of tenets will vary in each school based on local needs, the general tenets apply to all alternative schools. We do not wish the program to change into a charter school model.

By April 2011 all the schools had produced school-centric reports on the tenets, how they are implemented, how they line up with the school effectiveness framework, and where the schools would like the tenets to change, evolve or grow. Some work was done by principals and staff and other work by school councils. The ASAC sub-committee is currently working to bring these reports together into a first working discussion draft.

A third joint meeting was planned for early June, but had to be postponed until September, due to workloads, other commitments and team member availability.

ASAC will continue to work with principals, teachers, parents, students and senior staff on this important area.

Manor Park Postmortem

Manor Park Alternative School is scheduled to close as of September 2011. The board has provided a plan for where the students in Manor Park may choose to go, as well as for how the former Manor Park Alternative catchment area will be served by other Alternative schools.

What was not undertaken by the board was any sort of postmortem as to why the board felt the Alternative program at Manor Park was insufficient to maintain it as a program site. ASAC felt that it was irresponsible for an organization to admit failure but fail to do any analysis on this failure. If the board wants a strong Alternative program in the future, it is important to learn from our mistakes. Consequently ASAC undertook a mini-review while parents were still in the school, in order to try to understand what went wrong.

ASAC worked with members of the Manor Park school council to look into the history of the program, its demographics and its delivery. The key findings and recommendations are:

Findings

- Very few families are transferring from Manor Park to Riverview Alternative School. This indicates that for many families, the choice to attend Manor Park was based on non-alternative issues (busing, school avoidance)
- The difference in program delivery at Manor Park between the English and Alternative programs was not significant.
- Manor Park parents were not well informed about the tenets and expectations of the program.
- The Manor Park location was the result of a central decision that occurred when Crighton Alternative School was closed. It did not come with the grassroots parental support necessary to sustain and feed a vibrant Alternative community.
- Many “Alternative” families chose to opt for a cross-boundary transfer to another Alternative school, often at the suggestion of Manor Park staff, in order to achieve a true Alternative environment. This negative feedback loop further deteriorated the uniqueness of the program at the Manor Park site.

Analysis

The failure of the Manor Park Alternative program was a combination of it being moved into a community that had not embraced it, followed by years of Alternative Program uncertainty and school closures that encouraged school sites to focus on enrolment instead of uniqueness. The triple-tracking of the program under one name made it difficult for staff to foster the non-competitive, anecdotal, parental-involvement atmosphere at the core of the program. Finally, the program was located into a neighbourhood where there are significant biases against some other schools, and preference for busing, which both lead to families choosing the program for the wrong reasons. *(Note: You treat these final issues by addressing the cause, not banning the symptom)*

Recommendations

1. Alternative sites need to be located in areas with significant grassroots support.
2. Dual or triple tracking of Alternative schools should be avoided. Where they do occur, the school should be provided with its own identity within the site, as it is at Summit.
3. The board has to work with ASAC and the schools to make sure that parents have sufficient

information about the goals and expectations of the program.

4. The board has to make it clear to Alternative teachers and administrators that they are expected to adhere to the Alternative tenets and develop appropriate and differentiated delivery practices.
5. The Alternative community has to work together to strengthen the bridges and best practices between the different Alternative schools.

Anecdotal Reporting

The Alternative schools in Ottawa have a long-standing tradition of allowing parents the right to choose to receive either unmodified report cards or modified versions of the report card with marks blanked out. After the 2010 Alternative Program Review, board staff informed ASAC and the Alternative schools that this practice must be stopped and that modified versions of the report cards may not be provided to parents. This seemed odd to ASAC, as one of the rationale's board staff gave trustees for shutting the program down last year was that the program was not different enough. It seemed we were being told not to be different and then being accused of not being different enough.

Anecdotal reporting in Ottawa's Alternative schools have generally consisted on taking the official report card that is filed in the OSR and blanking out the marks on the copy sent home. This is a choice for parents, but re-enforces the Alternative program belief that anecdotal comments provide more meaningful feedback and provide a focus on learning. It is also in line with the report card practices at other alternative schools in the province, in Hamilton, Toronto and North Bay.

Board staff said that their hands were tied by new provincial reporting requirements, as outlined in the Growing Success document, despite these requirements actually moving the secondary school report cards closer to the alternative anecdotal copy format. ASAC contacted Ministry of Education staff and poured over provincial regulations and were unable to find any changes to support the board staff interpretations.

Finally ASAC contacted MPP Yasir Naqvi, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Education. Mr. Naqvi wrote back to ASAC:

As mentioned above, this is not a new policy, rather is the continuation of policy, which states that a copy of a complete report card must be entered into the Ontario Student Record for that student. However, my understanding is that local Alternative Schools have been informed that if a parent would like their child's grades "covered up" before their copy of the report card goes home, they can make that request to the school, who is permitted to comply.

ASAC is pleased to report that board staff, as reported to ASAC by Superintendent Frank Wiley, have now acknowledged our right to continue the practice of sending home anecdotal report cards. We will continue to work with board staff to clarify some of the implementation details, particularly around determining if a school can choose to make the anecdotal copy format the default, with an option by parents to receive the official version with marks.

Program Access Equity

Through the leadership of trustee Rob Campbell and the support of other trustees, ASAC was pleased with the work this year to provide:

- Expansion of the catchment areas of Riverview Alternative and Grant Alternative to the edges of the Greenbelt as of September 2011. This allows all students within the Greenbelt equitable and consistent access to the Alternative Program.
- In addition, the school board permitted some students currently attending Summit Alternative from within the Greenbelt but who were not receiving bus passes to start receiving them so that they had the same transportation rights as other students inside the Greenbelt.
- The board is to develop a demand survey for the Alternative Program outside the Greenbelt. This will assess how much interest there is in the Alternative program outside the Greenbelt and help the board decide if new Alternative school sites should be proposed, if busing into the current sites should be provided or if the status quo is sufficient.

ASAC has considered the demand survey issue carefully. Since knowledge of the program within the Greenbelt is limited and it is likely even smaller outside the Greenbelt, ASAC recommends a three stage approach to developing the demand survey:

1. Let ASAC and the Alternative Schools finish their work on reviewing and renewing the Alternative tenets.
2. Develop a communication plan so that there is awareness about the program's existence, tenets and structure outside the Greenbelt.
3. Draft and send out a demand survey, using true consultation with ASAC and the Alternative schools.

Alternative Community Building

One problem that the Alternative program has faced is that it exists in a limited number of sites across the city. Sharing best practices and building community are difficult when the schools operate in isolation. Therefore ASAC has worked with the Alternative schools over the years to help build these bridges.

ASAC is pleased with a number of initiatives this year to support the program and the community:

1. The appointment of Superintendent Frank Wiley as Superintendent responsible for the Alternative Program. This has provided, for the first time in many years, a single point of contact for principals for Alternative Program issues.
2. School-to-School partnerships. These have started up at the school level to help build some bridges, share best practices and support the community.
3. Alternative Sports Day. Our second Alternative Sports Day is planned for June at Summit. This is an opportunity for students to get together, under the mentorship of Summit Students, and explore Alternative games, leaderships, creativity and other aspects of the program.

Trustee Motions

In the spring of 2010 the board of trustees directed staff to work with ASAC on three areas:

Best Practices

ASAC representatives have made presentations to OCASC on Parental Involvement. We have also increased our participation in OCASC with a goal of building better bridges and sharing our best practices as requested by the board. We have offered to get involved in the new Provincially mandated “Parental Involvement Committee”.

In addition, best practices in terms of supporting the School Effectiveness Framework, are being analyzed in the ongoing Alternative Tenets Review (see below).

School Effectiveness Framework

As part of our internal Alternative Tenets review, the five remaining Alternative program sites have taken a fresh look at:

- The basic tenets of the program
- How these tenets support the School Effectiveness Framework
- How these tenets are implemented at each school.

As the work on the Alternative Tenets Review proceeds we may have a better idea on how to meet the obligations of the motion set out by trustees.

Principal Profile

The Alternative Schools have developed a number of similar principal profiles intended to outline the kind of parent/principal relationship that is necessary to the alternative foundation of student/teacher/parent (guardian). We need to work more with board staff to see how we can address the trustee's motion.

OCDSB Strategic Plan

In the winter of 2010 ASAC, with other groups, was invited to take part in some feedback forums on the “21st Century Learner” document. This was followed up in the summer with another workshop which ASAC representatives attended. The white paper driving this started with some ideas of board goals (reduced school transitions, community schools, etc.). ASAC had some concerns out the early drafts of these documents and developed some analysis that was shared and posted on the ASAC web site (<http://www.asac-ottawa.org/webpage/id/112>).

ASAC's main concern at the time was that, instead of identifying issues and asking for consultative feedback, the white paper presented preformed solutions to problems that had not previously been articulated.

In the fall of 2010 the board organized a set of public workshops on the Strategic Plan. These workshops avoided the white paper and instead sought out rapid-fire brainstorming on what participants would like to see in the school board in the future. While ASAC had not obtained the results of all the workshops, the results we did obtain pointed to strong support for:

- Choice, be it in programming or school.
- Grass-roots implementation as opposed to centrally-dictated practices
- Enhanced French within the English program

In April of 2011 the school board released a Strategy Map as the next phase in its Strategic Plan Development. This map outlined a vision, objections, mission and four key priority areas:

1. Well-being
2. Engagement
3. Leadership
4. Learning

While learning is an obvious goal for any school board's strategic plan, ASAC has concerns that the other three areas are ill-defined and do not address significant and tangible strategic directions. ASAC strongly recommends that the board revisit some of the recommendations from the fall workshops and refine its plan to address:

Grass-roots solutions

ASAC and the board both must deal with similar dynamics and issues. They must work within a framework (the alternative tenets; ministerial and trustee directives) and ensure that their schools put in place practices to meet the objectives of the framework while considering the local needs of distinct school populations. One traditional method of aligning the practices with the objectives is the traditional top-down managerial approach. This can be seen in the recent time-allocation model imposed on middle schools in order to meet an objective or increasing connections between students and staff.

ASAC's experience is that this method has serious shortcomings:

- It cannot easily account for local situations
- It dis-empowers the front-line staff and reduces morale
- It discourages innovation

Instead, ASAC strongly recommends that the board take a more grass-roots approach to delivery practices. The School Improvement plans are a good first step in this direction;

highlighting board objectives while letting schools come up with plans on how to address these objectives in practice. As the school board works with ASAC on Alternative best practices, ASAC would like to remind the school board that there is not one “best practice”, but rather multiple best practice examples that can serve as models for local innovation. The school board needs to re-dedicate itself to supporting and empowering its front-line teaching staff by allowing them to develop delivery strategies to meet the school board objectives.

As an example, perhaps pods or “houses” at middle school, with teachers tracking children through their grades, may work better in some schools than the currently mandated time-allocation model, while still addressing the same objectives. As the school board undertakes its secondary schools review, it is imperative that it use a modern approach of front-line empowerment. As a bonus, this will help the school board meet its goal of being the best educational employer in the city.

Choice

The public forums all highlighted a public desire for choice, be it in program or school. The school board has recognized choice in the past, but seems to have become shy about endorsing it of late. Complicating this further is disagreement as to what choice means. Is choice the availability of multiple programs? The ability for parents to choose schools? To choose school boards? Is it simply the choice between English and French-Immersion at their designated community school.

To ASAC, choice recognizes that students have different needs and learn in different ways. There is no one best practice, nor is a community necessarily geographically based. Choice recognizes that parents have some rights in determining what kind of education their children get. It recognizes that innovation comes from variety and difference.

ASAC strongly recommends that the school board recognize that it does not have a monopoly on education in Ottawa and that parents wishes are valuable and important. The school board needs to offer, support and market a variety of educational options to support the different learning styles of students and desires of parents.

French for All

While the French Immersion programs have been well received in the school board, they are not the whole story when it comes to French. There was strong feedback at the Strategic Plan open houses that the school board needed to re-evaluate how French is being taught in the Core English program. As the largest school board in the nation's capital, a city with a large interest in French, the OCDSB has a unique opportunity to lead the country in the teaching of French across all programs and to all kids, regardless of their program or aptitude.

Such a goal in the strategic plan would be bold, would give the school board a concrete focus and would talk to the community on how the school board wants to excel and serve its students. The Alternative schools have shown an interest in helping with this goal by piloting new and innovative delivery methods for French for kids whose learning styles may not suit French Immersion.

If the school board were to adopt these priority areas as a basis for building a five year strategic plan, the school board would have something meaningful, daring and constructive to move forward on. Something that parents, students and educators can relate to and something that helps identify and brand the school board.

ASAC Year End Recommendations

ASAC would like to take this opportunity to not only report on their activities this year, but also, in the capacity of an advisory committee to the school board, to make some recommendations:

1. The school board must re-align its strategic plan to support grass-roots innovation, choice and “French for All”.
2. If the school board wants an Alternative Program that is different, it must be prepared to support that program in being different. “Fair” and “Same” are different words with different meanings.
3. The school board needs to clarify its marketing strategy, not only in regards to how it makes some alternative practices available to other schools (see trustee motions B, C, D and F of the Alternative Elementary Program Review, February 2010), but also in making the existence of the program better known across the school board. This is essential as the school board plans to do a demand survey of parents outside the greenbelt.